

Parental Conflict and Other Correlates of the Adjustment of School-Age Children Whose Parents Have Separated

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In this study, several factors related to psychological adjustment of school-age children were examined in a sample of 40 lower-class families in which the parents were separated. It was hypothesized that parental conflict and other indices of family adversity, including maternal depression, income, and the length of time past since parental separation, would be important predictors of children's behavioral adjustment. Parental acrimony was found to be a significant correlate of children's behavioral problems, even when other family variables were taken into account. In addition, independent and additive effects on children's functioning were found for parental discord and maternal depression, with some support found for an additional variable, family income. In contrast to some prior investigations, the length of time since parental separation was unrelated to children's functioning. Results are discussed in terms of Rutter's cumulative stress hypothesis and previous research on parental discord.

Over the last 15 years, the divorce rate in the United States has increased dramatically. During the period between 1970 and 1980, the ratio of divorced persons rose 113% from 47 percent per 1,000 to 100 per 1,000 individuals (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981). On the basis of current statistics, it is estimated that half of the marriages begun in the mid-1970s will terminate

Manuscript received in final form August 25, 1986.

This research was supported in part by a grant to Robert E. Emery from the William T. Grant Foundation.

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in divorce, with children being involved in 60% of these cases (Cherlin, 1978). According to projections based on 1983 census data, 40% of all children can expect to spend "some meaningful length of time" in a single-parent household because of divorce (Norton, 1983). In fact, it has been demonstrated that the number of children affected by divorce has grown at a more rapid pace than the divorce rate itself (Benedek & Benedek, 1979).

As research on the effects of divorce on children has accumulated, investigators have increasingly focused on family process rather than family structure (Emery, Hetherington, & DiLalla, 1984). Events that accompany marital dissolution, rather than the divorce per se, have been identified as potentially more salient correlates of children's adjustment (Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1986; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978; Kurdek, 1981). Interparental conflict has been consistently identified as one such mediating variable (Emery, 1982a). Researchers have found parental conflict to be associated with behavioral disturbances among children from discordant but intact two-parent families (Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Johnson & Lobitz, 1974; Nye, 1957; Porter & O'Leary, 1980; Rutter, 1971), divorced and separated families (Hetherington, 1979; Kurdek, 1981; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1983), and families where spouse abuse has occurred (Christoupolus et al., in press; Hughes & Barad, 1983; Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981; Wolfe, Jaffe, Zak, & Wilson, 1986).

Investigators also have found other factors to mediate children's adaptation to divorce. More behavior problems are found when less time has passed since the parental separation (Hetherington, 1981; Kurdek, 1981) when maternal depression is present (Beardslee, Bemporad, Keller, & Klerman, 1983), and when available income is low (Colletta, 1978; Gould, Wunsch-Hitzig, & Dohrenwend, 1980). As is the case with parental conflict, consideration of these variables focuses attention on changes that often accompany a divorce rather than the event of divorce per se. From the perspective of research methodology, these are "third variables" that may explain the correlation found between divorce and adjustment problems among children.

Parental conflict, maternal depression, income, and the passage of time are not independently associated with the event of divorce, however, since these factors are potentially intercorrelated with each other. Thus, one factor might explain the relation found between children's adjustment following divorce and all other factors.

Rutter (1978) has suggested another possibility, relating children's adjustment not to the presence of any one factor but to the accumulation of several concurrent stressors. He has found that familial stressors that occur in isolation are not associated with a significantly increased risk of a child having a behavior disorder; however, when two or more stressors are present, the likelihood of emotional problems increase two- to fourfold. Rutter

(1978) has compiled a Family Adversity Index from his epidemiological inquiries that includes six factors associated interactively with children's adjustment problems. These include marital discord, the father having an unskilled/semiskilled job, overcrowding in the home, the mother suffering from depression or a neurotic disorder, the child ever having been placed "in care," and the father having been convicted of any offense against the law. Three of these factors—discord, father's occupation, and maternal depression or neurosis—are remarkably similar to variables investigated by divorce researchers: conflict, income, and maternal mental health, as discussed above.

The present study was designed as a further investigation of the potential mediators of children's adjustment to a parental separation, with an emphasis on the role of parental conflict. Three considerations distinguish this study from prior work on the topic. First, the present investigation was conducted with predominantly lower-class children, a sample that few other divorce investigators have examined. Second, a psychometrically sound, easily employed measure of conflict between separated or divorced parents was used. Third, although the focus of the study is on the relation between conflict and children's adjustment in this lower class sample, the potential role of other situational and family variables in mediating children's adjustment to parental separation was examined. Variables considered included the time past since parental separation, maternal depression, and the custodial parent's (mother's) income. Thus, family variables were considered both individually and cumulatively as potential predictors of several indices of children's adjustment.

As for indices of children's adjustment, earlier research has suggested that both family conflict (Emery, 1982a) and general family adversity (Rutter, 1978) are most strongly related to externalizing problems. However, clinical concerns have been raised about the impact of divorce on children's anxiety and self-concept (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1983), and measurement of these two domains has improved. Thus, the three global areas of children's adjustment assessed were externalizing, internalizing, and self-esteem.

METHOD

Subjects

The sample comprised 40 separated mothers and their school-aged target children, 21 girls and 19 boys. Children ranged in age from 5 to 12 years, with a mean of 8.2. Mothers ranged in age from 20 to 45 years, with a mean of 30.7. The length of parental separation (not divorce) varied from 2 months

to 6 years, with 62.5% of families having separated in the last 2 years. Mothers were custodial parents for the target children in all cases. The majority of study families were white (75%), with the remainder being black. There were no differences between subjects who agreed to participate and subjects who refused in terms of race or age of target child or mother. The mean income of the families in the sample was \$7,800, with 80% of the families having yearly earnings equal to \$10,000 or less. Mother's average level of education was 10 years, with 55% of them not having a high school degree.

Procedure

Families were recruited for participation in the project through the Charlottesville-Albemarle (Virginia) Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court. All families had contacted the court in the preceding year with a complaint concerning visitation and/or support of the target child. Seventy-five percent of the families approached about the study agreed to participate, and all families were compensated for their participation. Interviews, during which the following measures were completed, were conducted at the family's home, with separate interviews for mother and child.

Measures

Background Information. This questionnaire was composed of questions regarding demographic information (e.g., income, education, length of time since separation) and indicators of other chronic stressors (e.g., overcrowding in the home).

Acrimony Scale. Developed by Emery (1982b), the AS consists of 25 items, addressing areas of potential conflict between separated or divorced parents. A broad number of topics about children are included, e.g., visitation, custody, support, and general level of animosity. Parents respond to items on a 4-point scale, with choices ranging from 1 = "almost never" to 4 = "almost always." Examples of items include "Is visitation a problem between you and your former spouse?" "Do you have any angry disagreements with your former spouse?" and "Are alimony or support payments a problem between you and your former spouse?" Items are worded in a counter-balanced manner to control for response bias. The measure was designed to yield one scale labeled Acrimony, consisting of all 25 items. The scale has been found to have high internal consistency (.86) and test-retest reliability (.88) (Emery, 1982b). Internal consistency (alpha) for the measure in the present sample was .83.

Beck Depression Inventory. The BDI is a well-established and widely used measure of depressive state (Beck et al., 1961; Beck & Beamesderfer, 1974; Reynolds & Gould, 1981). Split-half reliability of the scale has been found to be high (.86 to .93). The total score of the BDI was employed in the present analysis.

Child Behavior Checklist. The CBCL is designed to assess an adult's perception of behavior problems in children from 4 to 16 years of age. Considerable normative and psychometric data have been reported for the CBCL, and the *T* scores used in the present study were derived from raw scores based on published norms for appropriate age and sex groups (Achenbach, 1978; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983). A number of narrow-band scales can be scored from the CBCL items, or the items can be scored into two broad-band factors. Because of the exploratory nature of this study and the desire to limit the chance of experimenter error, only *T* scores for the broad-band factors, labeled Internalizing and Externalizing, were used. In the present study, alphas of .83 and .84 were obtained for the Internalizing and Externalizing scales of the CBCL respectively.

Perceived Competence Scales. The PCS (Harter, 1982; Harter & Pike, 1984) are designed to evaluate children's assessment of their competence in four different areas of functioning. The version of the PCS used in the study has two forms, one for younger (ages 4-7) and one for older (ages 8-14) children. Three of the four factors, cognitive, social, and athletic competence, overlap between these two versions of the PCS. In the present study, analyses were limited to the social and cognitive factors because it was believed that these two components of self-esteem would be most sensitive to the effects of a parental separation. For the PCS for older children, internal consistencies for the two factors were .52 for cognitive competence and .11 for social competence. For the PCS for younger children, internal consistencies were .39 for cognitive competence and .84 for social competence. Raw scores of both versions were transformed to standardized *z* scores based on published norms for the appropriate age groups (Harter, 1982; Harter & Pike, 1984), so the two measures could be rendered comparable. When the older and younger versions of the PCS were combined, internal consistencies were .46 for the cognitive factor and .48 for the social factor.

RESULTS

Intercorrelations between family variables and child outcome variables are presented in Table I. As expected, level of parental acrimony, maternal well-being, and low family income all were found to be related to children's behavior problems. Surprisingly, bivariate relationships were stronger for

Table I. Correlations Between Family Variables and Child Outcome Variables

Family variables	Child outcome variables			
	(CBCL)		(PCS)	
	Internalizing	Externalizing	Cognitive	Social
Parental acrimony (AS)	.41 ^b	.24	.49 ^c	-.08
Maternal depression (BDI)	.56 ^c	.25	.23	.11
Family income	-.32 ^a	-.26	-.01	.43 ^b
Child's age	.38 ^b	-.02	.03	.23
Child's sex	.08	-.22	.30 ^a	.22
Length of parental separation	.02	.16	.00	-.19

^a*p* < .05.^b*p* < .01.^c*p* < .001.

children's internalizing problems (CBCL), with nonsignificant trends found for externalizing behavior. In addition, parental acrimony was found to be significantly related to children's perceived cognitive competence (PCS), while family income was associated with children's perceived social competence. Length of parental separation was unrelated to either maternal or child report of child adjustment. Bivariate relations between children's age and sex (1 = female, 2 = male) and outcome measures indicated that older children experienced more internalizing problems (CBCL) and that boys reported significantly higher levels of cognitive competence than did girls (PCS).

The intercorrelations found among the family variables are presented in Table II. Among these variables, maternal depression (BDI) was related positively to the parental conflict (AS) and to child's age, and negatively to the length of parental separation. Additionally, there was a nonsignificant trend for the BDI to be associated with family income.

Given that the predictor variables were intercorrelated, as it was anticipated that they might be, a series of hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted. Because of the present interest in the predictive power of parental conflict over and above the variance accounted for by time since separation, income, and maternal depression, all regressions included the acrimony

Table II. Intercorrelations of Independent Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Depression (BDI)	—					
2. Conflict (AS)	.42 ^b	—				
3. Income	-.26	-.02	—			
4. Child's age	.29 ^a	.18	.01	—		
5. Child's sex	.21	.17	.01	-.07	—	
6. Length of parental separation	-.47 ^c	-.01	-.07	-.03	-.07	—

^a*p* < .05.^b*p* < .01.^c*p* < .001.

Table III. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses for the Prediction of Internalizing Problem Behavior (CBCL)

Predictor variable	Increment in R^2	Overall R^2
Age and sex	.16 ^a	.16 ^a
Depression	.21 ^a	.37 ^c
Acrimony	.03	.40 ^c
Acrimony	.11 ^b	.27 ^b
Depression	.13 ^b	.40 ^c
Income	.10 ^a	.26 ^a
Acrimony	.11 ^a	.36 ^b
Acrimony	.11 ^a	.27 ^b
Income	.10 ^a	.36 ^b
Time since separation	.00	.16
Acrimony	.11 ^a	.27 ^a
Acrimony	.11 ^a	.27 ^b
Time since separation	.00	.27 ^a

^a $p < .05$.^b $p < .01$.^c $p < .001$.

scale and one other predictor variable. Children's age and sex were entered into all regressions first, and the other family variables were entered before and after acrimony in separate regressions. Results are presented in Table III. Acrimony was found to contribute significantly to the variance in explaining children's internalizing scores over and above sex and age influences. More important, its relation to internalizing was not accounted for by income or time since separation. Acrimony was not found to contribute significantly to predicting the variance in internalizing when maternal depression was entered into the regression first, however. On the other hand, depression remained a significant predictor of internalizing even when acrimony was entered first.

In order to examine Rutter's cumulative stressor hypothesis, two final analyses were performed. First, three of the independent variables were dichotomized into present or not present. Length of parental separation was excluded from this analysis because it does not have a counterpart on the family adversity index and because of its lack of relation to any of the dependent measures. For the BDI, a score of 10 or more was selected as criterion for maternal depression, since scores of 10 or more are considered to indicate at least mild depression (Beck & Beamesderfer, 1974). Families earning less than \$10,000 were considered financially stressed on the basis of recent census data (Norton, 1983). Since no cutoff scores have been developed for the AS, a median split was used to dichotomize the present sample into conflictual and nonconflictual groups (median = 66). Once each individual variable was dichotomized, a new variable was created that was the sum of the stressors

Table IV. Cell Means, *F* Ratios, and Between-Group Differences on the CBCL and PCS for Stressor Groups

Variable	Group 1	Group 2	Univariate <i>F</i> ratio
	0 or 1 stressors <i>N</i> = 23	1 or more stressors <i>N</i> = 17	
Internalizing (CBCL)	55.9, <i>SD</i> = 8.4	66.1, <i>SD</i> = 6.3	17.80 ^b
Externalizing (CBCL)	58.8, <i>SD</i> = 9.7	65.4, <i>SD</i> = 8.9	4.83 ^a
Social (PCS)	-.29, <i>SD</i> = 1.01	-.33, <i>SD</i> = .78	—
Cognitive (PCS)	-.51, <i>SD</i> = .74	-.41, <i>SD</i> = 1.01	—

^a*p* < .05.^b*p* < .001.

present. This variable was divided according to the number of stressors present (0 or 1 vs. 2 or 3). A MANOVA was conducted, using stressor group as the independent variable and the internalizing and externalizing scales of the CBCL as dependent variables. Results of the MANOVA, including cell means, are presented in Table IV. A significant multivariate effect for stressor group was found, $F(2, 37) = 8.79, p < .001$. Univariate analyses following the significant multivariate effect indicated that children in the high stressor group had significantly more internalizing problems, $F(1, 38) = 17.80, p < .001$, and externalizing problems, $F(1, 38) = 4.83, p < .05$, than children in the low stressor group. A similar MANOVA was conducted employing the two scales of the PCS as dependent variables, with no significant multivariate effect, $F(2, 35) = .08, n.s.$

In the second analysis of multiple stressor effects, the value of the two most salient family variables, depression and acrimony, were examined as predictors of elevated CBCL scores. Children's scores on internalizing and externalizing were dichotomized into ratings above and below 1 standard deviation above standardization sample means ($T = 60$), and a chi-square analysis of each of these variables was conducted with a composite depression/acrimony variable (1 = neither depression nor conflict present, 2 = either depression or conflict present, 3 = both depression and conflict present). Results are presented in Table V. Children's internalizing scores were significantly related to the presence of 0, 1, or 2 maternal stressors $\chi^2(2,$

Table V. Chi-Square Analysis: Parental Acrimony and/or Maternal Depression and Children's Internalizing and Externalizing Behaviors^a

	Low acrimony and low depression	High acrimony or high depression	High acrimony and high depression
Low internalizing	17	4	0
High internalizing	6	6	7
Low externalizing	15	4	1
High externalizing	8	6	6

^aFor Internalizing, chi square = 12.59, $p < .005$; for Externalizing, chi square = 6.10, $p < .05$.

$N = 40$) = 12.59, $p < .005$. Children with both high parental acrimony and high maternal depression exhibited elevated internalizing scores. In fact, among the children with both high parental acrimony and maternal depression, all seven were at least 1 standard deviation above the mean of the standardization sample. Similar results were obtained for externalizing, with children with higher levels of parental acrimony and maternal depression displaying greater externalizing problems, $\chi^2(2, N = 40) = 6.10, p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

At a broad level, two results of the present investigation are extensions of past research on childhood psychopathology. First, while the acrimony scale was found to be correlated with other indices of family distress in this sample, parental conflict still was associated with children's adjustment even when the influence of these variables was taken into account. Second, independent effects on children's functioning were found for two specific stressors, parental discord and maternal depression, with some support found for the influence of another variable, mother's income. In contrast to some previous studies of children's adjustment to divorce, no relation was found between the length of time since parental separation and children's functioning.

Rutter and colleagues (Rutter, 1978; Rutter, Cox, Tupling, Berger, & Yule, 1975; Rutter, Yule, et al., 1975) and Emery and O'Leary (1984) have suggested that interparental conflict should have a more adverse effect on children's functioning when it occurs in conjunction with other notable life stressors. Present results indicate that although parental conflict was a significant predictor of child behavior problems, the prediction of children's adjustment ratings was increased when maternal depression was considered simultaneously. The present findings are somewhat different from those of an earlier study of two-parent families in which the relation of parental conflict and parental depression to children's behavior in school was examined (Emery, Weintraub, & Neale, 1982). The earlier investigation suggested that marital discord accounted for the influence of depression in explaining child behavior problems. The present results are more supportive of the interactive effect suggested by Rutter (1978).

An unexpected finding in the present study was the lack of relation found between the length of time since the parental separation and the ratings of children's adjustment. Previous investigators have found significant improvement in children's adaptation to divorce as a function of time, noting that many children are able to return to previous levels of functioning within approximately 2 years (Hetherington, 1981; Kurdek, 1981). In fact, present

findings indicate a relation between length of parental separation and maternal depression, with mothers reporting higher levels of functioning as time passed since the separation. However, no such finding was evident for children's adjustment. Hetherington (1981) has argued that in the face of continued familial stressors, children are likely to continue to exhibit behavioral problems. The differences between the present findings and previous results in regard to time since separation could therefore be attributable to sample selection. In Hetherington's (1981) study of middle-class families, many of the stressors associated with divorce were transient, since the families gradually regrouped and attained a new equilibrium. In a lower-class sample however, many of the stressors associated with the parental separation are chronic and do not abate as time passes.

Another unanticipated finding was that stronger correlations were obtained between measures of family conflict and family adversity and children's internalizing problems. Previous researchers have found these familial factors to be most strongly related to externalizing (Emery, 1982a; Rutter, 1978). We have no ready explanation for the opposite pattern in the present study. It may be that the CBCL differs from similar instruments in its operationalization of internalizing and externalizing. Perhaps the conversion from raw to standard scores alters the linear distribution of the two dimensions in a way that differentially affects their correlations with other factors. In any case, the unexpected internalizing finding is intriguing and merits further research.

While the sample, measurement of conflict, examination of multiple stressors, and results for internalizing distinguish this report from most earlier research, it is necessary to point out some limitations of the study. First, the relations among maternal depression, parental discord and children's internalizing behaviors could be accounted for by observer response bias. Mother's ratings of their children's internalizing behavior could be attributed to their own depression, for example. Very few relations were obtained between mothers' reports of depression or conflict and *children's* perceived competence ratings. Related to this observation, it should be noted that very weak and nonsignificant correlations were found between Child Behavior Checklist and Perceived Competence Scale scores, the two major measures of children's adjustment. The argument could be made that parents and children were evaluating two distinct constructs, since the absence of pathology does not necessarily mark the presence of competence. Still, greater overlap between the two domains was expected, since children with fewer behavior problems, on the average, should report greater self-efficacy than their peers. The low internal consistencies obtained for the perceived competence scales therefore seem to be a more likely explanation for the weak correlations obtained between the two child outcome measures. Indeed, unreliable measurement of

perceived competence needs to be considered as an explanation of its low association with family stressor variables as well.

A second methodological limitation of the study is that the length of parental separation varied considerably. Although time since separation was not found to be related to children's adjustment, children whose parents have separated for 1 year and children whose parents have separated for 6 years generally are facing different issues (Hetherington et al., 1978; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1983). In the present sample, however, it appears that many of the families experienced similar life difficulties, e.g., poverty, conflict, and maternal depression despite differences in the length of time since the parental separation had taken place.

Finally, the size of the sample must be considered as a limitation in interpreting the present results. With a larger population, analysis of age and sex differences could have been performed. The former analysis may be especially important because of the age range of subjects and their divergent cognitive abilities. Nevertheless, the major findings of the present investigation were found to hold when the influences of age and sex were controlled statistically.

Despite these methodological considerations, the present results support the notion that parental conflict and maternal depression exert both independent and additive effects in predicting children's functioning within a sample of separated parents of low economic status. The present results indicate that these variables are salient correlates of children's functioning, even when other familial stressors that commonly accompany divorce are examined concurrently.

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